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Some Molycorp discussion in the last few paragraphs . . .

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Sports

'THE BOX': A TRUE GIFT LEGENDARY FISHERY IN NEW MEXICO AS JOYFUL AS IT CAN BE FRUSTRATING

Hugh Gardner Special to the News

Free-lancer Hugh Gardner lives in Idledale. He produced the award-winning video, "Incredible Journey of the Greenback Cutthroats," and is director of the Colorado Native Trout Education Project. He can be reached at (303) 697-5876.

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Surely one of the most intriguing of all western waters is "The Box" of the Rio Grande, near Taos, N.M. - 50 miles of canyon gorge, 1,000 feet deep. Narrow trails wind down steep drop-offs to water that roars and tumbles over huge boulders.

This legendary fishery can provide the most intimidating experience of your life or, with luck and persistence, the most joyous and rewarding.

The heart of The Box is Wild and Scenic Rivers National Recreation Area, where the Rio Grande is joined by its tributary, the Red River. It was described by the late A.J. McClane, author of McClane's New Standard Fishing Encyclopedia, thusly:

"The Rio Grande Box Canyon is truly a fabulous fishing water . . . a magnificent wild river. Rainbow and brown trout abound there and attain great size. . . . They are wild, fighting trout in turbulent water to tax the angler's skill in an awe-inspiring setting."

But fishing there can be a perilous descent into Dante's Inferno. You might brave unpredictable, violent weather, only to reach bottom and find the river raging, murky and tortuous to wade. Fish won't rise, or, if they do, they can wear you out trying to land them while in heavy currents. And, there is the exhausting hike back out.

"This is a fickle river," said Doug Camp, a Taos guide and owner of Willows Inn B&B. "You can't expect to catch fish here whenever it's convenient."

"First of all, there's runoff, which usually cranks up by April," Camp said. "That puts half the year out of reach until November. Then there's time of day. The best fishing is at dawn or dusk, before you get there or after you hike out - unless you risk falling in the dark."

"Then, you can be there on a beautiful day, with clear, low flows, and the fish refuse to cooperate. There's just no relation here between good fishing and good fishing conditions. In fact, the best times are often midge hatches in the dead of winter."

Doc Thompson of High Country Anglers in Ute Park said timing is the key to catching trout. "Fish it when the flows are low," Thompson said. "That's half the battle right there."

"If you don't find a hatch going on, you'll have to use nymphs - big ones, like Nos. 12 or 10. The secret is detecting strikes in fast-moving water. And use strong tippets, because you'd better hang on when those big cutbows go crashing downstream."

Both guides agree the best time of year is the two- to three-week caddis hatch in April. Elsewhere, it's called the Mother's Day Hatch; in The Box, it's the Tax Day Hatch.

This year, to the good fortune of anglers able to visit The Box, runoff was delayed by cool weather upstream in Colorado. The hatch peaked on schedule. For a little while, dry fly fishing was fabulous.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to the fickle Rio Grande. Wild Rivers Scenic Area also includes the lower 4 miles of the Red River Canyon, the most productive small stream fishery I ever have seen.

The lower Red perfectly defines "classic pocket water." In two hours of rock hopping, covering less than 80 yards, it's possible to hook 20 smallish browns, one big brown and two chunky cutbows.

Shockingly, acid drainage from a molybdenum mine at the Red's headwaters near Questa has laced the river with heavy metals, turning it a bizarre electric blue and killing virtually all life for several miles. How can a river of such modest size produce such good fishing when it is poisoned upstream?

The Red overcomes the pollution because its gorge cuts through the Sunshine Valley aquifer, which drains the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Half its flow issues from pure underground springs, which dilute the toxins and stabilize water temperature. Fish are able to feed year-round, although heavy metals might be stunting their growth. And the boulder-strewn bottom, so difficult for humans, is condo city for trout.

Presently, the mine operates at low levels. But expansion seems likely, according to environmentalist Andrew Kelton of New Mexico Trout.

"Molycorp could soon start open-cast mining again and double the size of its tailings ponds, directly threatening the springs that feed the lower Red," Kelton said.

The Environmental Protection Agency is considering making the mine a Superfund site while the state tightens lax regulations. A massive amount of federal money is probably the only way to clean it up. Concerned readers can contact Kelton at ajkelton@amigosbravos.org.

For now, the Red is an excellent destination in its own right, especially when the cranky Rio Grande refuses to deliver. But there is no guarantee it will last. The quality of fishing there seems to go up or down with the price of molybdenum.

Despite its tribulations, The Box, at its best, is as good as river fishing gets. As Taos novelist John Nichols puts it, "When I leap across those rocks, I feel more alive than at any other time."

INFOBOX

IF YOU GO

Getting there: 24 miles north of Taos, N.M., west on NM 378 for 3.3 miles, north of Questa. Then 5.5 miles to trailhead.

Fishing: Best November to April and during low light, low flows. Rainbows, cutbows, browns, northern pike. Popular flies include Griffiths Gnat in winter, gray Elk Hair caddis No. 16 in spring, Parachute Adams No. 16 in fall and Woolly Buggers year-round.

Trails: Trail difficulty moderate; 1,000-foot elevation drop into The Box. Topographical map is Guadalupe Mountain.

New Mexico fishing licenses: One day, \$14; five days, \$22; annual \$45.

Agency: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Wild and Scenic Rivers National Recreation Area, running south 48 miles from the Colorado line, plus the lower 4 miles of the Red River.

Guides and services: Motels in Taos, Questa, camping on BLM land.

Los Rios Anglers, Taos: (505) 758-2798.

Willows Inn B&B, Taos: (800) 525-8267.

High Country Anglers, Ute Park: (505) 376-9220.

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Color Photo (2); Caption: A fly angler straddles a boulder to reach pocket water in the Red River, a highly productive small-stream fishery. By Special to the News. CAPTION: The Wild and Scenic Rivers National Recreation Area near Taos, N.M., where the Red River and Rio Grande meet 1,000 feet below. By Special to the News.

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